beautifully-written and trenchant analysis of the contradictory possibilities the fashion industry poses for women. She rejects the prevailing view of feminist and Marxist cultural critics of fashion as "a reflection of the social onto the body, fashion as the repression of the natural body; fashion simply as a commodity to be resisted; fashion as substitute for the missing phallus." These claims rest on simple notions of a "natural" body that exists prior to its social construction, and that is deformed and rendered oppressed by that construction; if the oppressive social codes were removed, the "natural" body would be revealed and liberated. But Sawchuk argues that "an anti-fashion discourse cannot be assumed to be inherently feminist." Such discourses often depend upon misogynist views of women as too stupid to resist the blandishments of Madison Avenue, and/or have a hidden agenda in which women's potentially subversive sexuality, insisted upon by fashionable clothing, is to be denied. Sawchuk wants to insist on the *pleasure* that women get from clothing:

> *The acts of shopping, of wearing an article of clothing, of receiving clothing as a gift, can be expressions of recognition and love between women, or between women and men, which should not be ignored, though they may fail to transcend the dominant phallic economy of desire.*

Fashion, then, is neither inherently oppressive nor inherently liberating. It is "contradictory for women," and in that very contradiction lies the possibility of using it to push the boundaries of acceptable feminine sexuality.

Because these feminist essays are specifically concerned with the bodies of women, they avoid one of the major problems of this book and of any theoretical investigation of "the body." It seems to me that discussions of "the body" as an ungendered, neutral entity too easily slide into the assumption that it is male. For example, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker's essay, "Theses on the Disappearing Body in the Hyper-Modern Condition," seeks to "emphasize the fact that the (natural) body in the postmodern condition has *already* disappeared." This statement assumes, with most contemporary feminist theory (including Kim Sawchuk above), that the body, like gender, is socially constructed rather than an unchangeable biological entity. Yet the authors devote one paragraph specifically to women's bodies, which they claim "have always been postmodern because they have always been targets of....power." (There is, of course, no specific reference to men's bodies.) If women's bodies must be discussed separately, then "the body" must be male in its abstract form. (If a body can be something other than male or female, as Monique Wittig argues in "The Straight Mind," the possibility is not explored here.) Despite their theoretical disclaimers of "naturalness," the Krokers have fallen back on the assumption that there *is* an unchangeable, or at least, abstractable, state of the body and that women's bodies are the occasional exception to this general condition. Many of the other essays work on the same assumption, and indeed, I think it is difficult to avoid for any theory which takes "the body" as its object of study. Postmodern theorists would do well to note Adrienne Rich's words, quoted by Elspeth Probyn in "The Anorexic Body:" "To say 'the body' lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say 'my body' reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions."

Grandiose assertions, of course, are what postmodern theory does best. Perhaps because it insists on our contemporary isolation from history, writing such as this often insists disturbingly on the significance of current dilemmas. Not since the seventeenth-century millenarians have we heard such doomsaying as the editors' assertion that "what follows is body writing for the end of the world" or Baudrillard's notion of "the disappearance of history," in which "history can no longer surpass itself, it can no longer envisage its own finality, dream its own end." Because these claims seem inflated, even hysterical, I am tempted to dismiss them as insufficiently historical, mere navel-gazing. But a feminist writer not represented in *Body Invaders*, Christina Thurmer-Rohr, reminds us that "the patriarchal wish for omnipotence and total control has stepped out of the realm of mere fantasy, fiction and experiment into the realm of complete realisability."[1] What Thurmer-Rohr calls "the worldwide escalation of nuclear, chemical and biological means of annihilation" set our era apart definitively from the past. Nonetheless, seeing this difference clearly and facing the inevitable, daily anxiety it engenders can distract us from the political action that postmodern theory, with its recognition of the power of the media and the complex functioning of ideology, can also make possible. Fortunately, many of the essays in *Body Invaders* (most notably those by feminists) manifest a specific political agenda that is all the more effective because it is grounded in a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the dilemmas, temptations and possibilities of this era of late capitalism, high patriarchy, and nuclear terrorism — in sum, the postmodern condition.

[1]Christina Thurmer-Rohr, "From Deception to Un-Deception: On Complicity of Women," *Trivia* 12 (Spring 1988), p.63.

A WOMAN'S HISTORY OF SEX

Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche. London: Pandora, 1988.

Carol Greene

Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche's *A Women's History of Sex* has what so few other feminist studies have — humour!

The book is a tongue-in-cheek look at the ways women's sexuality has been controlled or has been the target of attempted control in history.

Gilbert's writing style and Roche's illustrations are perfect complements. Both are intelligently funny and discretely indiscreet. The text is wide in scope and succinctly written, yet there is no economy of laughs. Bold statements, titillating trivia and a personal voice give the reader a sense that she's sharing an uproarious laugh with a friend.

In the opening chronology, "Momentous Moments," Gilbert lists some milestones in our sexual past. We learn that Sappho of Lesbos wrote lyric poems in praise of love, lust and women in 6th century BC; that the bidet was invented to serve the growing popularity of oral sex in 17th-century France; and that in 1947 Dr. Helena Wright first challenged the 'efficacy of the penis-vagina combination' in producing orgasms for women .

The text reveals the origins of misog-

yny and the hypocrisies of times past and present. Historically women's sexuality has been subjugated in the interests of patriarchal political expediency. With the discovery of agriculture, for example, hunters returned to the domicile. Ideas of land and livestock ownership and of inheritance were developed; men soon wanted to ensure the 'legitimacy' of the paternal line. The result was an array of vile laws that brought an end to the relative sexual independence women had experienced up to the 2nd millennium BC. Like land and livestock, women became 'legal property.'

Wherever there is an historical example of women being duped in power relationships, there is a contemporary parallel. Gilbert is quick to illuminate these. She maligns the idea of a 1960s 'sexual revolution.' In the chapter "Brotherhood," dealing with the French Revolution, she writes:

> *Revolutions for the rights of men do tend to be just what they say. In the more recent turmoils of the 1960s, women who gave their brains, hearts and bodies to Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam, anti-Gaullist and other revolutionary movements also realized that their 'radical' brothers valued them only as envelope-addressers; or sex objects.*

Roche's illustrations, commissioned for Gilbert's text, are equally, if not more responsible for the hilarity. Roche's line has a spontaneous, unruly quality that is void of sleekness, and it's in this that the appeal and beauty of her work lie.

As Gilbert admits, this is not a comprehensive history. More precisely, it is a Western women's history of sex; even at that, the study is cursory. We are allowed only glimpses of the various epochs. A short bibliography is provided in which all directly quoted sources are listed, but there are no footnotes. This omission leaves the reader unable to pursue some of the more daring assertions, but it also reminds the reader that the work is intended primarily for fun.

In her final estimation, Gilbert optimistically asserts that we are "coming through" what has been a sexual history of repression and waste.

> *[We are] continuing to alter the social structures that cramp, hurt or do damage to us; continuing to assert our existence: our needs, our angers, our delights—it's things such as these that will determine whether the girls and women who follow us shrivel from the very mention of sex, or embrace it with mouths, breasts and thighs.*

COMPETITION: A Feminist Taboo?

Edited by Valerie Miner and Helen Longino. New York: The Feminist Press, 1987.

Teresa O'Brien

In our capitalist, individualist society, competition is an integral part of our learning, of our day-to-day realities, of our fight for feminist identity and achievement. For some, competition is a personal fight for grades, for a job, for love, for attention. For others, it involves more than the merely self-serving: it is a competitive battle with the powerful in the struggle for women's political, economic and social rights. Yet this in itself entails an assumption of a morally superior type of competition, belying the fact that such an assumption is itself competitive (that is, my brand of competitiveness is more authentic than yours). We are born into a competitive society and competition is fostered throughout our lives, through an educational system that all too often focuses on grades rather than learning, an economic system that focuses on material gain as an indication of worth. Competition exists, but must it be relegated as a rather suspect topic to the confines of mainstream ideology?

The writers in this book demonstrate that competition need not always be construed as a destructive phenomenon, based on internecine and structural rivalry. It may, they argue, be used to advantage since "competing brings experience and experience strengthens.... Appropriate competition encourages the experience, strength and confidence that nourish the cooperation that feminists prize." The book moves from vivid accounts of the role of competition in everyday life — personal, political, economic — to the ways in which competition might be used to transform our world. Is competition healthy, or is it an act of bad faith in our quest for sisterhood? Indeed, is such a quest doomed to failure since many sisters, including Cinderella, do not exactly set a fine example of a cooperative spirit?

I initially felt very uneasy about the tone of many parts of this book — especially the more self-analytical chapters. My uneasiness rested not on the idea that competition is a taboo subject, but on my feminist belief that psychological analyses of mother-daughter relationships or petty rivalries amongst females for the attention of men or the title of best-dressed or whatever, are not relevant to the more wide-ranging issues of class and gender. Yet obviously we must have an understanding of how we live our lives before we can implement change in those lives. Indeed, many of the contributors underline this when they point out the moral and political significance of competition and of how competition between women is not so much based on individualism but is instead a reflection of our positions *vis-à-vis* our race, colour and class. That competition may be used as a divide-and-conquer strategy is not a result of a patriarchal or a capitalist conspiracy, but is a reflection of those ideologies as they exist. One must, however, ask this: if a destructive form of competition is so endemic in our society, can we fight it